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TRAPPER EDUCATION AND FURBEARER MANAGEMENT*

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Modern concepts of furbearer harvest on a controlled, sustained-yield basis are in accordance with recognized principles of wildlife management and natural resource conservation. Steel traps, in the hands of private citizens and regulated by state fish and game agencies, have been the primary tools used in this country for managing furbearers. Fur resource managers recognize that traps are important tools not only in furbearer management, but also in some programs of wildlife damage or disease control. Traps also provide a major source of outdoor recreation for many people.

The Problem

In this modern era, where trapping is not as much a component of everyday life as it was 50 years ago, there is a terrific need for sources of information and instruction for young and novice trappers. High fur prices and increased public concern for wildlife have dictated the need for improved programs of furbearer management. In recent years, laws have been passed which have prohibited or drastically curtailed the use of traps in some areas. The threat of additional restrictions exists virtually everywhere.

Most arguments advanced by groups opposed to trapping can be classed as purely emotional appeals or as appeals to a misguided sense of "protectionism." However, some of the objections voiced by anti-trappers,

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although perhaps exaggerated, do have a factual basis. One point, which has been raised by groups of both trappers and anti-trappers, is the need for trapper education. No minimum standards of either knowledge or competence are required of a person purchasing a license to trap. Many common trapping abuses are attributable to young or inexperienced trappers. Furthermore, most of these abuses are preventable through proper training programs. Education, both of trappers and non-trappers, could be an important key to reducing objectionable trapping abuses and to promoting a greater understanding of furbearer management programs.

Bridging the Gap

Given the changing attitudes of today's society, there is a general need to ensure that trapping is conducted humanely and in an ethical manner. There is also a need for a change in attitude on the part of some trappers. Those attitudes towards wildlife that prevailed 100 years ago (and that were probably necessary for survival) are no longer acceptable to the general public. All wild animals have both good and bad attributes and trappers and anti-trappers alike should recognize this. A trapper should have respect for his quarry and a desire to learn more about furbearers and their habits. There is no room in the sport of trapping for the individual who traps with dislike or hatred for the animal he seeks. On the other hand, an unnatural reverence for wildlife, to the point of advocating complete protection, can be just as damaging.

Trapper education has the potential to be the single most important and effective step towards bridging the gap between trappers and non-trappers. If there is no other common ground between trapping and anti-trapping

interests, the need for trapper education should be one. Traps and trapping systems have evolved tremendously since Sewell Newhouse first began mass-manufacturing steel traps in 1823. With the invention and common employment of body-gripping traps, drowning slides, stop-loss devices, and offset jaws; the traps themselves have been made more humane. These devices, coupled with training in humane and selective trapping systems for various species, can lead to significant improvements in harvest techniques utilizing tools already commonly available and in widespread use.

To illustrate the potential of trapper education, assume that the larger or more wary terrestrial carnivores (coyotes, wolves, foxes, badgers, bobcats, lynx, ring-tailed cats, wolverines and fisher) can be captured only in dryland sets utilizing steel leghold traps. These species make up only 5 percent of the total furbearer harvest in this country (based on 1974-75 harvest figures). Most raccoons, opossums, skunks, weasels, marten and mink can be caught in body-gripping traps or drowning sets, while virtually all muskrats, beaver, otter and nutria could be captured in body-gripping traps or drowned. If these assumptions could be completely met, approximately 90 to 95 percent of all furbearers harvested in this country could be captured in a totally "humane" manner. Use of offset-jawed traps, 24-hour trap checking laws, and selective trapping techniques would ensure that dryland trapping met acceptable standards. Use of "killer" traps or sets should be discouraged for larger land animals because of the threat to pets and other nontarget species. Although the goals outlined above are probably not totally attainable, they do serve to illustrate the potential magnitude of trapper education in reducing unnecessary injury and suffering by trapped animals. All of this could be accomplished using currently available technology.

Planning an Education Program

Ideally, in establishing an educational program regarding trapping, a two-pronged approach should be made. The major phase of the program should be directed at the trappers themselves and should be concerned with effective, humane, selective and ethical trapping procedures. The second phase of the program should be to educate everyone in regard to furbearer management principles and the role of trapping. The total audience represents a spectrum of attitudes from the most dedicated trapper to the most equally dedicated anti-trapper. Within this spectrum, the educator can have the greatest potential impact on the middle range where strong opinions have not yet been formed. Because these people are not initially concerned, they are not likely to attend educational meetings. For this reason, the general public education phase of the program should stress mass media techniques--newspapers, magazines, radio and television--rather than relying on personal contacts or group meetings.

Hopefully, a comprehensive educational program on trapping would include detailed discussions of the following topics:

Phase I. Trapper Education

1. Trap sizes and basic sets for various furbearer species. Stress using proper size and style of trap for each species in each situation. Cover applications and use of leghold, body-gripping and live-traps.
2. Selective trapping techniques. Stress trap placement--particularly in regard to trapping near exposed baits or trails. Also discuss "dog-proof" sets, selective lures, etc.
3. Furbearer biology, behavior and management. A general overview of principles of biology and management for common furbearer species. Stress the importance of respecting and studying the animal sought.

4. Harvest regulations, trespass laws and outdoor ethics. It is impossible to teach ethics, but education can provide a norm of ethical behavior to serve as a standard.
5. Fur handling. Proper skinning, pelt preparation, stretching, drying and marketing. Reduce wastage of a valuable natural resource. Also cover utilization of furbearers as sources of human or pet food.
6. Moral and philosophical aspects of trapping. Explain that trapping is an individual decision. Cover differences in philosophy concerning trapping as a technique for furbearer management, wildlife damage control and wildlife disease control.
7. Hunters vs. trappers. Address the issue of hunter-trapper conflicts and mutual concerns for the furbearer resource.
8. History and heritage of trapping. Trace the history and role of trapping and trappers in the development of this country.
9. Trapper safety. Cover safety precautions in situations that might be encountered in the field.
10. Respect. For the furbearer and for the rights of others. Discourage trapping in "high visibility" or intensively used areas.

Phase II. Public Education

1. Principles of wildlife management and the roles of hunting and trapping.
2. Furbearer biology and population dynamics.
3. Moral and philosophical aspects of trapping.
4. History and heritage of trapping.

Current Progress in Trapper Education

Trapper education has received increased emphasis in this country in recent years. Several states have initiated youth education programs on trapping and fur harvest in the form of 4-H projects. In some states,

trapping organizations have set up voluntary educational programs for young trappers. An important milestone was reached recently when the state of Washington became the first state in the nation to enact a mandatory trapper education requirement for persons purchasing a trapping license for the first time.

Canada has a strong program to further the education of trappers and promote humane trapping methods. The Canadian Trappers Federation has recently completed the Canadian Trappers Manual, designed to serve as an educational aid for trappers in that country. The Federal Provincial Committee for Humane Trapping has screened hundreds of trap designs in search of more humane devices for capturing wild furbearers. These types of aggressive programs will help to ensure the future of trapping, despite the changing attitudes of society.

Trapper education can be a powerful force in helping to further programs of furbearer management. By helping trappers to avoid common trapping abuses and by providing information to the public on the role of trapping in furbearer management, educational programs can help to assure that trapping will continue to be available as a management tool. Mandatory programs of education for new trappers would help to assure that at least minimum standards of knowledge and competence are met by novice trappers. Public education programs, via mass media, will also improve public understanding and knowledge regarding furbearer management techniques and programs. These programs can be important in reducing the amount of unproductive conflict between trappers and anti-trappers, while helping to channel the efforts of both groups into areas of mutual benefit and interest--namely the welfare of furbearers and other wildlife species.